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RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS IN POLAND: DO WE NEED AN INVENTORY?

Abstract

We know about at least seven genuine runic inscriptions found on the territory of modern Poland, three of them written in the older futhark. Unfortunately, runes are mostly forgotten in Polish historiography, and an inventory of such objects is urgently needed.

Key words: Runes, Poland, historiography.

Słowa kluczowe: runy, Polska, historiografia.

When discussing the issue of runic artefacts in Poland, we need to state that there were different factors determining the research in the past.¹ Sometimes, it was simply a kind of scientific fashion; other times, it was political and had its impact on historiography. We can track this influence back to the 19th century, where we can encounter the first remarks on runes made by Polish scholars. In the middle of the 19th century, prominent Polish historians such as Joachim Lelewel and Wacław Maciejowski believed that ancient Slaves used runes as a script.² Of course, all the artefacts they relied on were evidently fakes. Later, in the second half of the 19th century, we can recognise the enormous influence exerted by German historiography. Polish historians willingly used any and all opportunities to appease German historians and to find similarities, even in such areas as runology. If there were an insufficient number of original inscriptions, they simply accepted fakes. The best example of this almost hypnotic fascina-

¹ Based on: W. Krawczuk, „Inskrypcje runiczne w Polsce”, *Studia epigraficzne* 3 (2008), pp. 57–64.

² H.M. Słoczyński, *Światło w dziejarskiej ciemnicy. Koncepcja dziejów i interpretacja przeszłości Polski Joachima Lelewela*, Historia Jagiellonica, Kraków 2010, p. 297.

tion is the work of Franciszek Piekosiński, who assumed that runes constituted a source of Polish heraldry.³ This positivist approach to runes had already begun to vanish before the First World War and especially after 1918 when Poland gained independence. There was no need for runes, but for strong anti-German sentiment – perceptible even in studies devoted to the beginnings of Polish history. Of course, the phenomenon was reciprocal and we can observe a strong anti-Polish sentiment in Germany as well. Quite often, German historians used quasi-runic artefacts to strengthen their political rights to some territories such as the province of Silesia.

After 1945, the ruling regime supported a group of historians and archaeologists who presented a thesis of the permanent habitation of Slavs (i.e. Poles) in the territory of the Polish state. Runes were banished as Germanic signs used by the Nazis. Even after 1989, this so-called “autochthonous” school in archaeology remained strong; although since the 1970s, there were many scholars supporting a different view: that of German tribes living in Silesia and Małopolska (Lesser Poland) in the first 500 years of the Common Era. It should be mentioned that this new school of Polish archaeology was founded in Kraków by Professor Kazimierz Godłowski. Runic inscriptions could provide fuel to the arguments of both sides, but this was not the case. Even today, runes are mostly forgotten, as in the latest, fine book by Andrzej Kokowski *Ancient Poland. From the 3rd Century BCE until the End of Antiquity* (Warsaw 2005). Kokowski did not use this opportunity to present runic artefacts found in Poland, although he is a keen observer of runology. Naturally, there are some exceptions such as the work of archeologist Joanna Dzieciółowska, but, unfortunately, her 2001 paper on runic artefacts in Poland has never been published.⁴ Runes were of course neglected or forgotten by the opponents of the “Godłowski school”. There is also no tradition of runologic studies, and thus Polish archaeologists, linguists and historians do not have any background to do this work properly. The situation is changing slowly thanks to new projects such as the new book on runes, with contemporary literature⁵. Evidently, there are some scholars like Leszek Słupecki who have been working on runic inscriptions for many years.⁶

Nevertheless, we shall discuss the main question, i.e. if there are any runic inscriptions in Poland in its contemporary borders, and if so, how many of them

³ F. Piekosiński, *O dynastycznym szlachte polskiej pochodzeniu*, Kraków: Akademia Umiejętności, 1888, pp. 51–68.

⁴ J. Dzieciółowska, „Rowasz – pismo karpaccich Szeklerów”, *Plaj. Almanach Karpacki* 28, 2004, p. 160.

⁵ W. Maciejewski, P. Horbowicz, G. Kreutzer, D. Skrzypek, *Runy*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2011.

⁶ L.P. Słupecki, „Inkebjorkunimerbaerekuarisakari. Miłość wryta runami”, [in:] *Cor hominis. Wielkie namietności w dziejach, źródłach i studiach nad przeszłością*, ed. S. Rosik, P. Wiszewski, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2007, pp. 235–252.

can be found. The answer appears to be simple – yes, there are such objects, even of the older futhark.

We can divide the artefacts into four groups: 1. inscriptions found in the territory of Poland – at least seven of them; 2. inscriptions imported to Poland – three of them (the number of original inscriptions from the past seems to be low, nonetheless we may posit that it is much bigger;⁷ 3. forgeries – number unknown, but at least some were widely discussed in historiography and had a profound impact; 4. inscriptions carved recently in the wave of great interest in the Viking past and fantasy literature – the number is not insignificant, we have some runic stones in Poland in Brodnica and Wolin (Jomsborg!) engraved by Erik Sankvist under the supervision of the Danish Runic Institute. The above-mentioned objects have a fairly large impact on the broader public. There are many people, young and old, willing to learn how to write and read runes.

In 1968, the first symposium on the eastern connections of the Nordic People in the Viking Period and Early Middle Ages took place. At this meeting, Aslak Liestøl stated that there had been only three runic inscriptions found so far in the Soviet Union.⁸ Today, there are many, many more known runic artefacts in Russia. This is thanks to Prof Elena Melnikowa and other historians who looked for the exemplary runic inscriptions on the coins. There is every reason that we can also find similar objects in Poland. We need to stress that since the 18th century in Russia there was and still is a fine tradition of discussing the Scandinavian influence. Even if it was censored by the tsar and later by the communist authorities, it is flourishing today. In Poland, discussions on the “Nordic impact” have restarted only recently, in which archaeologists have taken the lead. Historians are still somehow under the tremendous influence (both positive and negative) of the late Gerard Labuda’s “autochthonous” school.

There is also the very question of Polish epigraphy. We have a distinguished tradition in the inventory of medieval and early modern inscriptions. A huge project, initiated in the 1970s by the late Józef Szymański, called *Corpus Inscriptionum Poloniae*, was developed in accordance with the pattern of *Deutsche Inschriften*. Runic inscriptions were excluded from this project. Nevertheless, since there is a great tradition of runology in Germany, it did not cause a problem at all. In Poland, however, with no such experience, runic inscriptions are now in a scientific void. There is no epigraphic project that would take them into account. On the other hand, some of the runes found in the Polish territory are considered to be the oldest inscriptions craved here. Strangely enough, we have simply neglected them! Nonetheless, there is a chance that a thorough

⁷ E. Melnikova, *Skandinavskie runicheskie nadpisi*, Moskwa: Wostocznaja literatura RAN, 2001.

⁸ A. Liestøl, “Runic Inscriptions”, [in:] *Varangian problems, Scando Slavica supplementum I*, Munksgaard, Copenhagen 1970, pp. 122–123.

investigation of those objects could broaden our perspective on the past history of our land.

So let us take a look at the runic inscriptions found in the territory of the modern Polish state. We have three inscriptions written in the older futhark: 1. on a ring from Karlino (Körlin) from the 6th century CE; 2. bracteate type C (dated also to the 5th–7th centuries CE) from Wapno with a short inscription “SABAR”; 3. last, but not least, an inscription on a spear head from Rozwadów (unfortunately lost, but dated possibly even to the 3th century CE). All are widely known in foreign literature, but are almost absent from scientific discussions in Poland. In the older literature, we can also find other remarks on at least three objects from Silesia (Sieraków, Niezdrowice, Dziedzice) with inscriptions in the older futhark that were engraved on stone and pottery objects and cinerary urns. Today they are considered instead to be geometrical ornaments, sometimes quite similar to runes. In the 1930s though, there were German historians, especially in Silesia, who used these objects as a proof that this province, i.e. Silesia, had been German since the ancient times. Even the characteristic sign of the half-moon with the cross on the Silesian eagle of the Piast dynasty (the so-called “Silesian band”) was recognised as the rune of the god Tyr.⁹

There are also four inscriptions from the Viking period: 1. a short inscription on a bone from Kamień Pomorski, dating to the mid-11th century; 2. a short inscription from Wolin (better known as Jomsborg) from the 10th or 11th century that can also be interpreted as an ornament; 3. the famous inscription from Kałdus found by Professor Wojciech Chudziak: a short runic inscription on a playing die from the 12th century; and finally, 4. an inscription on a coin (*dirhem*) found in the small city of Świelub in Pomerania.

Thus, we have at our disposal at least seven genuine runic inscriptions found in modern Polish territory. Out of the older ones, only the bracteate from Wapno has survived in the *Museum of Prehistory and Early History* (*Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*) in Berlin. There is, however, a possibility that the other two (Rozwadów and Karlino) will be found again one day.

The third group (imported objects) is quite small; there are only three of them. Interestingly, all were imported to Poland in the 19th century during the wave of Romanticism. These are two runic calendars from the early modern period; the first is preserved in the Castle Museum in Pszczyna (Pless). The second, a so-called clog calendar from Uppland, is displayed in the Jagiellonian University Museum, and was a gift from Henryk Bukowski, a Polish emigrant living in Stockholm and a famous antiquarian who donated this object in 1872.

⁹ M. Cetwinski, „Sudeckie fantazje historyczne” [in:] *Metamorfozy śląskie*, Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Częstochowie, 2002, pp. 287–288.

However, the longest and possibly most widely known runic inscription is located in the Vang church in Karpacz. This Norwegian stave church from the early 13th century was transported to Silesia in 1842. The original inscription, which was in very bad shape and later meticulously copied in the 19th century, exists in the runic databases.

There are also forgeries – these can also be of great interest for historians and archaeologists working on historiography. We can name here Volker Schmidt and his article on the Prillwitzer fakes, or Krzysztof Maciej Kowalski and his work *The Fascination with Runes in 19th and Early 20th Century Poland*.¹⁰

When counting the objects, we can also ask about databases. Can we find an inventory of runes in Poland as well? We can submit queries to the German *Runenprojekt Kiel* for the older futhark. It presents six such inscriptions from Poland, but it also portrays objects that are recognised today as runelike ornaments (e.g. Dziedzice/Sedschütz). It features a bracteate from Suchan with no legible inscription. Apparently, it is positive that we can use this tool, but the information is very sparse and can be misleading. There is also Swedish *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, but even here there are problems with precisely covering our land, which is not “nordisk” at all.

So yes, we do need an inventory. However, the main problem is whether such a project will find substantial support. I am rather pessimistic in this respect. We still do not know where many of the inscriptions are today. They may be either lost, or in some archaeological storehouse.

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INSKRYPCJE RUNICZNE W POLSCE – CZY POTRZEBNA JEST NAM ICH INWENTARYZACJA?

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi podsumowanie dotychczasowych badań dotyczących identyfikacji obiektów z napisami runicznymi: zarówno tych istniejących, jak i zaginionych. Choć niektóre z nich pochodzą z najstarszej epoki występowania pisma runicznego, nadal brakuje w Polsce dokładnego inwentarza tych zabytków.

¹⁰ V. Schmidt, „Die Prillwitzer Idole, Rethra und die Anfänge der Forschung im Lande Stargard“, [in:] *Inventing the Pasts in North Central Europe. The National Perception of Early Medieval History and Archeology*, eds. M. Hardt, C. Lübke, D. Schorkowitz (Gesellschaften und Staaten in Epochenwandel, Bd. 9), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 96–110. K.M. Kowalski, *The fascination with Runes in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Poland*, [in:] *Roman, Runes and Ogham. Medieval Inscriptions in the Insular World and on the Continent*, ed. J. Higgit, K. Forsyth, D.N. Parsons, Donington: Paul Watkins, 2001, pp. 134–147.

